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ABSTRACT

Issues associated with minimum competency testing are discussed: the national, state, and local context for MCT program development; MCT's potential impact; the use and development of MCT programs; and reactions to the testing programs. Presently, the federal role is described as limited to providing information, research support, and technical information, although some government officials support national competency standards. Most activity has occurred at the state level, with the emphasis on integrating testing programs which combine earlier testing of basic skills with periodic assessment during high school. Local school districts are also active, as exemplified by the Basic Skills Assessment program. The basic skills of reading, writing and mathematics are the focus of most MCT programs. Both positive and negative impacts will be experienced by students, teachers, schools, administrators, school boards, parents, potential employers, and test developers. Guidelines are offered for appropriate and inappropriate test use and for selecting and scoring tests. For those who favor MCT, a cautious approach to program development is recommended, using an advisory group composed of community members and educators; instituting a pilot program; and studying the results before setting standards and operationalizing a program. (MH)

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CRITICAL ISSUES IN MINIMAL COMPETENCY TESTING

John Fremer

INTRODUCTION

The issues associated with the development and use of minimum competency testing programs require careful analysis from many different perspectives. This paper provides the perspective of a test program developer on the following aspects of such programs:

I. What is the national, state, and local context for MCT program development?

II. What are the potential impacts of MCT programs?

III. How should MCT programs be developed and used?

IV. How should individuals with strong positive or strong negative views react to such programs?

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WHAT IS THE NATIONAL, STATE, AND LOCAL CONTEXT FOR MCT PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT?

The attitude of the general public toward the MCT movement is well-represented in a cartoon that appeared in a June 1976 issue of U.S. News and World Report. In the cartoon a high school principal appears on a platform in an auditorium setting that is set up to make it clear that it is high school graduation day. The principal is smiling and holding up a phonograph record. He is saying "and this year for our graduates who can't read, a recorded diploma." Many public school educators view this as a low and scurrilous attack on our educational system. It is the case, however, that this unfair representation does indeed reflect a very widely held concern about standards in U.S. elementary and secondary education. This concern is at the basis of a number of developments in minimum competency testing at the federal, state, and local level.

National Level

Looking first at the national level -- a small, but quite influential, group of legislators have issued calls for either a national high school graduation test or some type of national graduation standard. Among the "charter members" of this group are included Admiral Rickover, Senator Pell, and Representative Mottl. The idea of a national test, even on a "voluntary" basis, has not won broad support either in the Congress or the nation at large. However, the most recent Elementary and Secondary Education Act does call for federal support for states opting to develop minimum competency testing programs.

The current federal position regarding MCT appears to be that stated by Secretary Califano in an October 1977 address to a College Entrance Examination

Board meeting:

> "I believe every state should have a program for developing and measuring basic skills that includes competency testing, but the individual states and the districts should decide how to make use of competency testing in their programs. The federal government should support, but not direct, their efforts."

Similar statements have been made by representatives of the federal government at a variety of conferences in the past year. For the present, at least, the federal role is defined as that of information gatherer, supporter of research, and provider of technical information.

State Level

The greatest amount of minimum competency testing activity has taken place at the state level. The state of Oregon announced a competency requirement for graduation in 1972, indicating that graduation in 1978 would be based, in part, upon demonstrated student proficiency. In August of 1976 the National Center for Educational Statistics reported that 29 states had reached the planning stage of consideration of minimum competency testing. By January of 1978 Chris Pipho of the Education Commission of the States was reporting that every state had a committee, commission, or task force looking at the possibility of either legislation or state board regulations on the topic. The May 1978 Kappan carried an article indicating that 33 states had already mandated programs and suggesting that other states might act in the following year (Chris Pipho, 1978). After the extraordinary initial swing to minimum competency at the state level, the pace of legislative activity has slowed but state level staff are now dealing with the tasks of program development and implementation.

The state level programs that have been designed vary on a number of dimensions yet are all attempting to establish a minimal level of student proficiency.

One general approach involves the development or selection of a state level examination. In Florida, for example, the state has been responsible for examination development, administration, scoring, and related operational requirements of the testing program.

Other states such as Arizona, California, and Oregon have required minimal competency testing in particular subjects of school districts but have left the choice of tests and most of the arrangements for using the tests to the local districts. The states have stipulated, however, the grade levels for testing and have required that the districts offer students multiple opportunities to pass the tests.

The various states that have adopted minimum competency testing requirements have provided for a phase-in period. The number of years between the time the requirement is announced and the time that it is to go into effect varies from state to state. The age at which testing is to take place also varies somewhat from state to state. It is most common for states to require testing at the eighth or ninth grade, but some states have indicated that testing should take place for the first time at the eleventh grade. There is a clear movement, however, away from requiring testing late in the school years and towards the development of integrated programs of testing that combine earlier testing for basic skills with checkpoint testing during the high school years.

Local District Level

There has been a good deal of local school district [illegible] in the area of minimum competency testing. The Denver, Colorado schools, for example, have required students to pass examinations in order to receive high school diplomas for more than 17 years. In the state of Florida, the Duval county schools had initiated work on a minimum competency testing program prior to the state level

adoption of an examination as a requirement for all districts within the state. However, the pace of local district activity has been very much influenced by state level regulations and legislation. Once the state has adopted an examination requirement, the local district has to coordinate its activities to complement the state's offerings.

One minimum competency testing program, the Basic Skills Assessment, represents the combined efforts of a national group of school districts operating as a consortium that provides policy direction to a nationally available battery of examinations in reading, writing, and mathematics. This program is national in the sense that tests and services are used in a number of different districts across the states, but the program calls for local districts to set their own standards on the basis of the examination. The program provides procedures for setting standards by the use of professional judgment and empirical data (Zieky and Livingston, 1977).

Content of Minimum Competency Examinations

Although the educational goals for elementary and secondary education in various school districts and states are quite broad in scope, the examinations that are being used are focused on the basic skill areas of reading, writing, and mathematics. Moreover, these examinations cover a limited range of skills. In reading, for example, there is a great deal of emphasis on reading for detail, and reading for main ideas, with almost no emphasis on evaluation or higher level reading skills. The tests have a very heavy emphasis on practical and applied skills, using stimulus material and questions directed at the kinds of skill applications that students must make in both the school setting and in everyday life. Almost all of the examinations are of the objectively scored type, although there has been some use of essay examinations in some programs. In Gary, Indiana, for example, and in the Basic Skills Assessment direct measures

of writing followed by teacher grading of results is an important part of the examination program. Many school districts and states, however, have been reluctant to use direct measures of writing because of the time and expense associated with scoring the student papers.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL IMPACTS OF MCT PROGRAMS?

The minimum competency testing movement can be expected to have significant impacts on a variety of aspects of school programs and on the individuals associated with such programs. This is a point worth emphasizing as much of the testing done in the schools has little impact on school practice or on the individuals involved because no critical decisions are made on the basis of the test results. From my perspective as a test developer, the practice of administering tests, scoring them and filing away the results seems an unfortunate waste of student and teacher time. Also, such pointless testing promotes negative attitudes toward the field of testing and reduces the possibility that tests will be employed to provide the kind of information that can help facilitate the work of elementary and secondary school educators.

Since minimal competency tests are tied to important decisions about students and programs, it is clear that impacts can be expected throughout school programs. The MCT movement is at an early enough stage that it is necessary to talk about potential rather than actual impacts in order to provide a broad analysis of possible positive and negative effects. My own speculations regarding these possible effects are presented as a series of lists of both positive and negative outcomes that may result. I view the positive outcomes as ones that are likely to result when school districts devote sufficient time to long term planning, define clearly the responsibilities of the individuals who will develop and use

the minimum competency testing program, and involve a broad array of school staff and community members in the development and refinement of a program. In such cases the testing program can be clearly linked to the instructional program so that the identification of student deficiencies is followed by appropriate remedial treatment and monitoring of student progress with the goal of bringing as many students as possible up to a proficiency level judged essential by the local school district or state agency. Fortunately, there are a number of publications available which provide analysis of the major issues that school districts must consider in developing their programs (Bossone, 1978; Brickell, 1978; Fremer, et al., 1975; Haney & Madaus, 1978; National School Board Association, 1978; National School Public Relations Association, 1978; Neill, 1978).

The negative outcomes that are identified in the list below are the ones that I see as likely with poorly designed and developed minimum competency testing programs. I do not see these negative aspects as inevitable consequences of the adoption and use of minimum competency testing programs in a school district or state.

Potential Impacts of Minimum Competency Testing (* = most critical issues)

Area of Impact	Positive	Negative
Students	* Early identification of need Clear goals * Provision of remediation * Monitoring of progress * More attention to basic skills * Meaningful diploma	* Negative label Restriction of options in school * Denial of diploma Reduction of post-secondary opportunities
Teachers	Instructional management information * Clear goals * In-service training--remediation, measurement Supplementary aid More opportunities for individualized instruction	* Unrealistic assignments Loss of jobs * Loss of freedom Parental pressure Law suits

Area of Impact	Positive	Negative
Curriculum, Instruction, and School Climate	Clearer statements of objectives and priorities * Focus on applications Increase in emphasis on writing More extensive remedial options * Increased emphasis on standards Better match of students and programs	* Restriction of curriculum Cram books and coaching Divisiveness inside of school Strong limits on innovation
Administrators	* Evaluation information Clear goals Increased funding	* More forms and reports Need for more staff and facilities Poor publicity Law suits
School Boards	* Evaluation information * Meaningful diploma Increased funding Increased public awareness of schools	Need to obtain funds for remediation Poor publicity * Law suits
Parents	Identification of child's needs * Literate children * Meaningful diploma	Increased school taxes * Denial of diploma to child
Employers	Labor pool with certified literacy	Increased school taxes
Testmakers	Chance to contribute to educational goals * Test results that are actually used * Increased test development work Greater support for testing research Incentive to communicate with general public	* Victims of "blame the thermometer"[2] Restriction of breadth of testing * Danger of overemphasis on testing Pressures to move too quickly Law suits

[2] If people choose to criticize tests instead of dealing with the problems highlighted by testing.

HOW SHOULD MCT PROGRAMS BE DEVELOPED AND USED

The developers of minimum competency testing programs face many important decisions in the course of program design and implementation. It may be useful to have as background for this work a set of guidelines covering the areas of appropriate uses for minimum competency testing programs, inappropriate uses, ways of selecting and using tests, and suggestions about using scores. The set of guidelines that follow were drawn from the authors experience at Educational Testing Service in the course of developing the Basic Skills Assessment.

Guidelines for Minimum Competency Testing

Appropriate Uses for Minimum Competency Tests in Schools

1. Administer competency tests in the early grades as a part of a diagnostic process that identifies students needing special help.

2. Administer competency tests at several points during the eighth through twelfth grades to assess students' progress.

3. Administer competency tests to some or all students at one or more points during the eighth through twelfth grades to obtain information on the effectiveness of educational programs that focus on the areas tested.

4. Administer the competency tests as one part of a graduation requirement as long as the following conditions are met:

   —Remedial assistance is available to students who fail initially to meet performance standards.

   —Sufficient time is allowed for remediation.

   --Students have multiple opportunities to pass the tests.

Inappropriate Uses of Minimum Competency Tests in Schools

1. Administer competency tests one time only, near the end of the senior year, as a graduation requirement.

2. Administer competency tests as a graduation requirement without any provision for remedial help for those who fail to meet the performance standard.

3. Use competancy tests as the sole basis for awarding a high school diploma, e.g., without attendance and course requirements.

4. Restrict the schools' curriculum to the specific content of the tests.

5. Use the results of competency tests for evaluating the performance of teachers.

Test Selection and Use

1. Evaluate the appropriateness of any competency test for your setting.

2. Use several sources of information when making critical decisions.

3. Review the process and results of using any program.

4. Keep tests in perspective. All tests have limitations.

5. Maintain test security.

6. Respect the students' right to privacy.

Using Test Scores and Standards

1. If there is a mandatory minimum score required for graduation, it must be clearly defined and the rationale and methodology used for establishing the standard should be documented and open to review.

2. Teachers and administrators should not use test scores as the only criterion in deciding how much and what type of remedial work is necessary for a particular student.

3. To establish test-performance standards, a school should employ every resource available to it, e.g., teachers, local employers, community groups, etc.

4. Recognize that the setting of performance standards has social and political implications for students, schools, and the community.

5. Consider the standards established and processes used by schools in other regions and even in other states. (Learn by the experience of other districts.)

6. Any standards that are set should take effect only after students, teachers, and administrators have had ample warning and opportunity for adjustment.

7. Listen for and encourage feedback from students, teachers, and parents.

8. Standards should be reviewed periodically and revised in the light of experience.

9. Set separate standards for each subject-matter area that is tested.

HOW SHOULD INDIVIDUALS WITH STRONG POSITIVE OR STRONG NEGATIVE VIEWS REACT TO SUCH PROGRAMS?

The preceding section of this paper addresses specific aspects of minimum competency testing program development. In this section two general strategies are offered, one for those who are very positive about minimum competency testing and one for those who are very negative about this movement. Starting with those who are very positive toward the movement, I would reccommend a cautious and deliberate approach to program development. In attempting to introduce a program either at the state or local district level, an advisory group should be formed consisting of both educators and community members. These individuals should play an important role in developing a program philosophy and a set of procedures designed to lead to a program consistent with that program philosophy. The minimum competency tests that are selected from external sources or developed for the program should be used on a pilot basis and the results studied before standards are set and before the program is made operational. The program should have a clearly defined purpose such as the identification of students for remediation, the establishment of a standard for graduation, or the provision of information for use in evaluating programs. There should be a clear link between testing and provision of appropriate instruction. In all phases of program development and implementation schools should move slowly and keep the community well-informed regarding the steps that are being taken and the rationale for the steps.

Those who are opposed to minimum competency testing should proceed in a quite different manner. Their ends will not be served by trying to ignore the minimum competency testing movement, by digging in their heels, and by trying to resist MCT at every possible turn. Instead, opponents of such programs should try

to jump on the bandwagon while it is rolling and to call for more speed. Opponents should become active workers for the swift and total implementation of minimal competency testing program in their district or state. They should try to get other people involved whole-heartedly in the process. Opponents should call for as many tests as possible to be introduced into the system. Tests should be used not only for students, but also for teachers; not only for teachers but also for administrators. The possibility of testing school board members or perhaps even state legislators should not be ignored. Work should be carried out in secret as much as possible and testing should be kept entirely separate from the instructional program. Very high standards should be set for all tests but no attention should be given to the actual content of the tests or for the realism of the standards when they are set. Instead test score standards should be set at a level that looks good but with no accompanying rationale. The goal should be that of "proving" that the district or state has a high quality school system without any attention to the possible impact on students and teachers.

Opponents of minimal competency testing who follow the set of strategies that have been indicated and use their skills effectively, should be able to kill minimum competency testing completely in their districts or states within a very short period of time. They will then have the satisfaction of knowing that they have effectively prevented the systematic collection of data on student competencies in the basic skills areas.

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